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Article:

Muers, R (2020) The personal is the (academic) political: Why care about the love lives of theologians? *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 73 (3). pp. 191-202. ISSN 0036-9306

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000319>

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The Personal is the (Academic-)Political: Why Care About The Love Lives of Theologians?

Introduction: Ways of Contextualising Theology

What might be learned, for theology, from the recent flurry of interest in the complex love triangle of Nelly Barth, Charlotte von Kirschbaum and Karl Barth – and is that flurry of interest any more than the theological world’s equivalent of celebrity gossip? Following the release in the early 2000s of archival material relating to those relationships, Christiane Tietz’s 2016 presentation to the Karl Barth Society of North America, and its subsequent publication in *Theology Today*, raised a storm in certain sections of the English-language theological blogosphere. This was perhaps surprising, since, as many have acknowledged, the basic shape of the story had been known for many years.¹ The purpose of this article is not to re-examine that story, either for itself or for what it tells us about any of the three main characters.² My interest is in the ‘story of the story’ – how and why it is told, and what that tells us about contemporary theology. Why would, and why should, anyone care about the love life – or to be more precise (as the narrators often are) the sex life – of theologians?

In what follows, I explore some features of how the story has been told, in and since the Tietz presentation and article – as a starting-point for asking what can be learned, for and about the discipline of theology, from the sudden (if localised) upsurge of interest in the Barths and von Kirschbaum. Before engaging in detail with any retellings of the story, however, it is worth asking whether there are good reasons in principle why theologians might care about the love lives and domestic arrangements of the fellow theologians whose work they study and cite. Stephen Plant, in his recent article on the subject, offers a *prima facie* plausible and important starting-point; in this, incidentally, he differs from Tietz, who discusses in her paper whether it is morally justifiable for her to read the personal correspondence that is the basis of her article, but does not ask why she or anyone else would think it was worth doing so. Plant writes, in the introduction to a section on the *Church Dogmatics* and other texts: ‘I take the view that ideas don’t generate themselves, and that therefore any history of ideas that does not take into account the material conditions of their generation will tend to fly off into abstract idealism’.³

Spelled out, the claim advanced here is not unusual, and indeed is rather widely assumed in contemporary theological work – certainly in any theological work that has learned anything from liberation and contextual theologies, from the *nouvelle theologie*, or from a myriad of other movements seeking to pay due attention from a theological perspective to the ‘material conditions’ of ideas. In order to be good readers, we need to recognise – so the implied argument goes – that intellectual work is produced by flesh-and-blood people in particular locations and situations, and these locations and situations shape what can be said and how it can be said. More to the point, Christian theologians should be particularly attentive to this materiality, this flesh-and-blood character, of theology just because at the heart of their endeavour is the *logos* of God made flesh and blood.

Various accounts would be possible of what difference (in general) such awareness might make to the reading of theology – what it would look like, in Plant’s terms, not to ‘fly off into abstract

¹ For a detailed account of which, see Christiane Tietz, ‘Karl Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum’, *Theology Today*, 74/2 (2017), pp. 86-111, here pp. 86-88.

² I acknowledge with gratitude invaluable discussions with Ben Fulford, Tom Greggs, Mike Higton and Susannah Ticciati, as well as the advice of the *SJT* editor and the anonymous reviewers. I take full responsibility for the views expressed here, and for the defects of the finished article.

³ Stephen Plant, ‘When Karl Met Lollo: The Origins and Consequences of Karl Barth’s relationship with Charlotte von Kirschbaum’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 72/2 (2019), pp. 127-145, here pp. 139-40.

idealism' when reading the *Church Dogmatics*; but all that we need to accept in order to follow the argument thus far is that we might understand a theological text better if we read it as a text produced in a specific context. That being so, if we care about understanding Karl Barth's theology as fully as possible – and clearly at least some of us do, if 'we' are the guild of systematic theologians – we should also care about understanding his life, the context in which that theology was produced. If theology is, to use the commonplace metaphor, a conversation, we want to know something about the person with whom we are talking. Once this is admitted, there is, we might think, no good reason why our interest in the context of theology should stop with the 'public' social, political and academic context. After all, the domestic and familial context is for the most part more on a theologian's mind, more significant on a day-to-day basis, than the larger canvas of her or his world.

Specifically, there are many reasons to think that feminist theologians, and those wishing to take the insights of feminism seriously, should welcome the extension of a theologian's 'context'. Reducing 'context' to politics and public life, and disregarding specific domestic contexts, reinforces the gendered public-private split; colludes in making women's unpaid labour invisible; and helps to preserve the myth of a self-standing and self-sustaining male-dominated 'public' sphere of ideas and arguments that rises effortlessly above localised emotions and material needs. Arguably, to counteract both the disembodiment of theology and theology's collusion with patriarchy, we *should* be willing to talk about theologians' domestic arrangements – even when they are not as tabloid-friendly as the Barth-von Kirschbaum situation.

It might also be argued that a reluctance even to acknowledge the sex lives of great theologians – the visceral distaste that the sex-related speculation in blogs and articles responding to Tietz's work will produce in some readers (including, I admit, in me) – is itself the result of a theologically-inflected negative attitude to sexuality that needs to be overcome as part of the feminist liberationist project. Perhaps my problem is really that I am unaccustomed to dealing with any association between theology and bodily fluids; or perhaps I am just being too British.⁴ Either way, if that is the problem, I and others should get over it, if for no other reason than because this anti-sex attitude is so strongly associated with theological misogyny.⁵

All of this appears to suggest that the project undertaken by Plant, and differently by Tietz, in uncovering and examining the Barth-von Kirschbaum story, should be welcomed by theologians and not only by historians. In later sections of this article, I will argue that the attention paid to this story is, at best, a symptom of a problem in theology that will not be overcome by further work of this kind. There may be nothing wrong with being interested in 'Karl, Nelly and Lollo', but it is important to be aware how that interest – like, indeed, the celebrity gossip industry – tends to reinforce rather than to critique the gendered power structures within which it sits.

Before continuing that discussion, one rather different possible reason for wanting to tell this story should be noted. Both Tietz and Plant in their articles explicitly distance themselves from any wish to pass definitive moral judgement on the characters involved – although of course there is moral judgement at work throughout, not least in the decisions about which issues to discuss and how to

⁴ Or perhaps I have spent too long reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who defended the virtues of 'English [sic] hypocrisy' over 'German "honesty"' on these matters. See Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (DBWE 8) trans. Isabel Best *et al* (Fortress: Minneapolis, 2010), pp.214-215. For the recent upsurge of interest in Bonhoeffer's own sex life, see more or less any review of Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Knopf, 2014).

⁵ For an extended recent discussion of the relationships between misogyny, fear of the body and negative attitudes to sex and sexuality in Christian theology, see Tina Beattie, *Theology after Postmodernity: Divining the Void – A Lacanian Reading of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2015); see the summary on pp.2-3.

frame them. Some of those who read Tietz's article, despite her own words of caution, had no qualms about passing judgement on Karl Barth - and drawing conclusions from this about how and even whether Karl Barth's work should be read.⁶ For some, then, it would seem that there is an argument for telling the 'Karl, Nelly and Lollo' story akin to the 'public interest defence' used when newspapers publish accounts of the 'private' lives of politicians. We, the public, have an interest (so goes the defence) in knowing as much as possible about the lives and actions of key individuals whom we are collectively asked to trust, so that we can make informed decisions about whether they are trustworthy people. Certainly some of the responses to Tietz's article spoke in terms of the betrayal or loss of trust. This dimension of the debate raises, again, a number of issues about how theological authorship and authority is understood, to which I will return below. I note simply at this point that this kind of defence of the stories requires the prior decision that Karl Barth's personal status as a theological authority is the main point at issue – and this is likely to have implications for how the story is told and how the characters in it are represented.

Encountering 'Lollo' and 'Nelly' in 'Barth's' Story

In this section, as the beginning of a critical consideration of how to attend to theologians' domestic and familial contexts, I discuss two interconnected problems with how the story is presented in Plant's article 'When Karl Met Lollo'. I argue that at key points this telling of the story adopts uncritically, and hence reinforces, the patriarchal male gaze directed at its female characters; and that there are real tensions around acknowledging the agency, and in particular the theological agency, of the women in the story. These problems, I shall go on to suggest, are not incidental; rather, they expose deep-seated issues in systematic theology and the way in which the lives and works of theologians are written about.⁷

First, then, the patriarchal male gaze – not simply a man's perspective on the world, but the gaze that fixes a woman as an object of male evaluation (and possibly of desire and possession) is most obvious and egregious at von Kirschbaum's first appearance in the article. She was, we learn, 'slightly built', even 'elfin' in appearance. The gaze, initially Karl's, becomes the gaze of a wider circle of men, all looking at von Kirschbaum, desiring what they see, remarking on her 'attractions'; 'Hellmut Gollwitzer was half in love with her', another academic man proposed marriage to her.⁸ We have no idea what Karl Barth's figure was like, of course, nor whether he was physically attractive; at this point the author and the implied reader are looking through a man's eyes at the woman in front of him, agreeing with the men of the 1920s theological fraternity that Charlotte von Kirschbaum is – as they might say now – hot. It is almost impossible to imagine the equivalent discussion of a male theologian - or for that matter, a female theologian who did not happen to feature in the love life of a male theologian – finding its way into print. If we had more grounds to be confident that women in

⁶ See, both for examples of commentators discussing the relevance of moral judgements on Karl Barth's behaviour for evaluations of his theology, and for a window into the controversy around the Tietz article, the series of blog entries by Bobby Grow indexed under <https://growrag.wordpress.com/2017/10/12/an-index-to-the-karl-barth-and-charlotte-von-kirschbaum-posts-and-some-closing-thoughts-on-the-whole-ordeal/>; and Mark Galli, 'What to Make of Karl Barth's Steadfast Adultery?', *Christianity Today*, October 2017 https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/october-web-only/what-to-make-of-karl-barths-steadfast-adultery.html?utm_source=ctweekly-html&utm_medium=Newsletter&utm_term=19605280&utm_content=543397655&utm_campaign=email.

⁷ They are also, I should add, neither unique to this article nor uniformly characteristic of it.

⁸ 'When Karl Met Lollo', pp. 132-3.

academia were never judged on their appearance these days, it might be possible to be more relaxed about it.⁹

Beyond this straightforward example, adoption and reinforcement of the patriarchal male gaze affects the presentation of the lives of Nelly Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum at several key points. We are told that Nelly Barth ‘appears to have been in many ways the ideal pastor’s wife’.¹⁰ Now, it is presumably the case that Nelly Barth *was*, during her lifetime, frequently judged according to her apparent value to the man to whose vocation she was a useful appendage. Here, however, she ‘appears’ in this light, not only to her contemporaries, but also to the historian and his readers; we are invited to look at her through the ‘pastor’s’ eyes, and make judgements about how well she is doing from his point of view. Through these eyes, the fact that she ‘attempted to read theology’ is interesting only because, like her musical gifts and training, it made her more valuable as a pastor’s wife.¹¹ Similarly, in the next section of the article, Charlotte von Kirschbaum’s ability to learn New Testament Greek, Latin and typing is interesting because it fits beautifully with Karl Barth’s ‘plan’ to ‘train her as his secretary and research assistant’.¹²

While the patriarchal male gaze is held, the question of whether Nelly Barth had any original ideas about the theology she studied in Safenwil – let alone the question of whether Karl Barth was in any way the ideal violinist’s husband – cannot even be asked; we only see Nelly in terms of her value to Karl. It is important to emphasise again that this gaze is *not* held consistently throughout the article; but the fact that it operates at key points in the early sections is significant, because intentionally or otherwise it sets up the frame within which the reader will interpret the relationships. The reader has been invited from the start to see things, not only from Karl Barth’s point of view, but from the point of view of the patriarchal-male subject who assesses women according to their value and significance for men.

One of the inevitable conclusions of such an assessment is, of course, that Charlotte von Kirschbaum was of enormous value and significance to Karl Barth. This way of looking at it, her value *to Karl Barth*, becomes particularly problematic when we consider the treatment of her theological work. In his careful reconstruction of life in the household, Plant paints a vivid and compelling picture of von Kirschbaum’s working life during the production of the *Church Dogmatics*. It is apparent in the story he tells that von Kirschbaum was a significant contributor to the *Church Dogmatics* – effectively a co-author.¹³ However, this powerful depiction of von Kirschbaum’s real daily work – and later of the

⁹ On which see for example Francesca Stavrakopoulou, ‘Female academics: don’t power dress, forget heels – and no flowing hair allowed’, *The Guardian* 26th October 2014 (<https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2014/oct/26/-sp-female-academics-dont-power-dress-forget-heels-and-no-flowing-hair-allowed>).

¹⁰ p.131.

¹¹ *Ibid.* Tietz notes that Nelly Hoffmann (as she then was) was a violinist trained at the Geneva Conservatory – ‘Karl Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum’, p.87.

¹² p.134.

¹³ Clearly this is very complex territory. It is not the purpose of this piece to resolve the debates about von Kirschbaum’s specific intellectual contribution, and particularly her precise role in the ‘small print’ sections of the *Church Dogmatics* – for an overview of which, see Tietz, ‘Karl Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum’, p. 107. See also for von Kirschbaum’s theological work and particularly for her contribution to theological anthropology, Renate Koebler, *In The Shadow of Karl Barth: Charlotte von Kirschbaum*, trans. Keith Crim (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1987); Suzanne Selinger, *Charlotte von Kirschbaum and Karl Barth: A Study in Biography and the History of Theology* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1998). I merely observe here that most contemporary academic conventions would mean von Kirschbaum was credited as a co-author, even if she ‘only’ did what Plant describes – that is, extensive and essential primary

personal cost she incurred – makes it all the more disturbing that, in the latter sections of the article, the *Church Dogmatics* is discussed simply as '[Karl] Barth's' work. It is mined for evidence of exactly what 'Barth' thought about various topics, and presented as if it were entirely the product of 'Barth's' intellectual creativity and labour. Von Kirschbaum's lifetime of work, at the key point in the article where the discussion switches to theology, is absorbed into 'Barth's' voice. The absorption of von Kirschbaum's voice into Karl Barth's is not only what happened in the story that is told; it happens in the way this article presents the story.¹⁴ In a particularly telling phrase quoted in the article, a housekeeper describes the Barth-von Kirschbaum household as 'ordered around the demands of the Professor's work', as if 'the Professor' was the only one who worked, or the only one whose work mattered. That is not surprising in context; what is more troubling is the contemporary replication, even in the face of the evidence, of the idea that all the work of the *Church Dogmatics* was simply and solely 'the Professor's work'.

The contrast between the importance accorded to 'the Professor's' work on the one hand, and to that of the two women on the other, is underlined even by decisions about naming and terminology.¹⁵ Only Karl – despite the title of the article – is referred to frequently by his surname, emphasising his status as author and authority; he is 'the Professor', who represents the entire household and its work in the male-dominated public sphere. Nelly Barth is consistently 'Nelly'. Von Kirschbaum, once she enters the Barth household, is almost always diminished to her diminutive – 'Lollo' – even when she is sitting on a stage next to 'the Professor' as he delivers the lectures they have both worked on. The household arrangement, meanwhile, is referred to by the term Karl chose for it – a *Notgemeinschaft*, a 'union of necessity and trouble' to use Tietz's translation. This tends to elide the very different levels of power and agency exercised by the three protagonists at its inception, and again imports Karl's assumption that the 'needs' of his work were both self-evident and self-evidently primary.¹⁶ The crucial issue that emerges here is the characterisation of, and the value attached to, certain kinds of theological authorship. It is not simply that the *Church Dogmatics* is the main focus of interest (that would not be surprising) – it is that this work is so closely bound up with its named author, who is heard as a single authoritative voice presenting a single theological vision, and then presented biographically as the agent around whose vision and work everything and everyone revolves.

In this context, Plant's article in fact offers the opportunity to think very differently about the *Church Dogmatics* project and the different contributors to it. Thanks to the extensive new archive work we do, unusually, hear Nelly Barth's own voice – even occasionally her theological voice; and we hear it in conversation, supported and challenged by perspectives from her female friends and relatives. It is thus disappointing when this voice is marginalised or belittled by negative judgements on Nelly, mostly made by Karl Barth and his male friends, with which the reader is frequently encouraged by the structure of the article to concur. For example, at the fateful moment when von Kirschbaum moves into the Barth household, we learn from Edward Thurneysen – elsewhere acknowledged as a

research in the history of theology, and sustained discussion of the emerging theses with 'lead author' Karl Barth.

¹⁴ And this again points to the fact that the story raises wider –political – issues that cannot be resolved by digging deeper into the feelings and actions of the individuals involved. Tietz claims, on the basis of evidence from correspondence, that von Kirschbaum was happy with her anonymity ('Karl Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum', p. 91); whether or not that is a fair representation of her state of mind and her personal preferences, it has no bearing on the question of the fair representation of her work.

¹⁵ I am grateful to Ben Fulford and Susannah Ticciati for suggestions developed in this paragraph.

¹⁶ Although it should be acknowledged that *Not* as need in the sense of trouble ('being in need') arguably applied equally to all three.

complex and potentially unreliable witness, but here allowed to speak unchallenged – that it was all Nelly’s fault because of her ‘deep and irremediable self-absorption’ (of which there is, incidentally, little evidence offered in the article; perhaps Nelly’s self-absorption at this point stands for her reluctance to have her needs and wishes absorbed into Karl’s project).¹⁷

Similarly and decisively, at the end of the article – in order to achieve ‘reconciliation’ – we are invited to accept, or at least to sympathise strongly with, Karl’s claim that Nelly ‘has never really come to terms with the realities of the world, preferring to live in her imagination and in a brittle, old-fashioned morality’.¹⁸ Now, there are obvious and probably cheap retorts to this – for example, that the ‘reality’ Nelly was reluctant to come to terms with was Karl’s behaviour; that her imagination was possibly a more comfortable and rewarding place to live than the Barth-von Kirschbaum household at some points; and that her ‘brittle, old-fashioned morality’ extended to such old-fashioned practices as keeping her marriage vows to Karl, looking after Karl’s children, and caring for a very ill woman who happened to have been Karl’s mistress. However, the point once again is not to start an argument with the elderly Karl Barth, but rather to observe what the use of this material in the article does to the presentation of Nelly Barth. In the end, insofar as she has an independent theological and ethical perspective – emerging in fragments in the letters, and even hinted at in this final reference to her ‘morality’ – it is undermined in the interests of a textually performed ‘reconciliation’ between conflicting voices that ends up as an amplification of Karl’s voice. Karl has the last word, and he says that Nelly does not really know what she is talking about.

Overall, then, the effect of this telling of the story is to keep Karl Barth firmly at the centre of the picture – not only as the object of study, but as the authoritative and trustworthy subject. It is not that no other voices, perspectives or actions are given space, but that these voices, perspectives and actions, *and the women whose voices, perspectives and actions they are*, are read from a perspective very close to (what we learn was) Karl Barth’s own – the perspective from which everything in his life, including everyone in ‘his’ household, has to be subordinated to ‘his’ academic project.

Now, of course it is not surprising or problematic when a biographical piece about a famous author interprets everything, including the lives of others, in relation to its implications for the biographical subject and his or her literary oeuvre; we would expect that to happen, for example – albeit probably without the asymmetric comments on physical appearance and sexual attractiveness – in articles about Charlotte Brontë and (‘the Professor’) Constantin Heger.¹⁹ The critical issues for theologians in relation to the telling of the Barth-von Kirschbaum story are, I suggest, not about accuracy of biography, nor even narrowly about how specific biographical details might relate to details of an author’s work, but rather about how biography is used to present or reinforce certain visions of what theology is, how it is done, and how authority and authorship work.

The Power of ‘Barth’

¹⁷ ‘When Karl Met Lollo’, p. 134.

¹⁸ Not only this, but also to accept that this is ‘not a criticism – just an observation’. *Ibid.*, p.144.

¹⁹ This comparison might bear further reflection – not least because of the odd parallels in the subsequent histories of the relationships, involving in each case the posthumous publication of an intimate correspondence that at least one of the parties appears to have wished to destroy. On the suggestion that Karl Barth wanted his correspondence with Charlotte von Kirschbaum destroyed, see Tietz, ‘Karl Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum’, pp.91-2. See for an example of a Heger-focused article about Brontë, Sue Lonoff, ‘The Three Faces of Constantin Heger’, *Brontë Studies* 36/1 (2011), pp. 28-37; there is in fact a brief reference here to Heger’s physical appearance, albeit quoted directly from Brontë’s own words without authorial comment.

Karl Barth, after all, is for theologians not merely a figure in the history of ideas, an object of study – as Charlotte Brontë is for scholars of English literature. He is also an exemplar, perhaps for some *the* exemplar, of (a certain kind of) academic theological practice. The treatment of the ‘Karl Met Lollo’ story, not only in this article, has the net effect of reinforcing the image of ‘Barth’ as one of the theologians whose status, as author and authority figure, is not to be challenged. According to the unwritten rules of the discipline, at least in certain sections of the academy (including, to be clear, where I locate myself), ‘Barth’ can be argued with, criticised, judged to be catastrophically wrong – but he will always be one of the voices in the conversation, and nobody will be asked to justify citing or discussing his work.²⁰ The unspoken assumption that ‘Barth’ – and others in the succession of theological patriarchs – will retain space at the centre of the conversation means that the contextualisation of theology, as expressed in Plant’s recognition that ‘ideas do not generate themselves’, is limited in its possible scope and in how it is presented. Ideas do not generate themselves – but in order to hold this disciplinary space, to retain the unquestioned authority to demand everyone’s attention, they still have to have a clear authorial pedigree that is trusted and recognised by the community. They still have to be ‘Barth’s’ ideas, *and* ‘Barth’ still has to be worth listening to.

Beyond this, however, it is important to acknowledge that the focus on individuals as sole creative originators of coherent theological systems makes deep and important – perhaps indispensable – sense for the discipline of systematic theology. Prosaically, it reflects the common – though not universal – experience of writing as a form of intellectual production; the author, unlike, say, the research scientist, does usually need ‘a room of [her or his] own’. At a deep level, however, it reflects a commitment to the relational unity of theology’s subject matter. The theologian seeks to understand how any given claim might make sense as part of a larger exercise of reasoning about ‘God and all things in relation to God’; and she needs to take each of the theologians she reads to be engaged in such an exercise, in order to be able to evaluate their claims.²¹ Doing justice to theology as ‘systematic’ theology requires the reader to make connections beyond what is set out on the page – to recognise that theological writing is, by virtue of its subject matter, both systematic and unfinished. If theology does any part of its job well, it repays the trust of the reader who attempts to follow the sense it makes, beyond what is set out on the page. ‘Barth’ is read systematically so that his writings can be the basis of further critical and constructive work in systematic theology. Theological readers apply, extend, think with and think beyond ‘Barth’ in order to pursue the larger task of systematic theological reasoning in which he is also engaged. Complex questions arise at the confluence of these two dynamics – the establishment of authority through authorial and citational pedigrees, and the need to read and reason systematically (or at least, in terms of multiple interconnections) in order to do justice to theology’s subject-matter.

What happens when we set the story of the story of ‘Karl, Nelly and Lollo’ in the context of the politics of theological authorship and authority? In this context, the article by Plant discussed above – and the real internal tensions to which I have alluded – draws attention to a wider problem. The discipline of theology, as Karl Barth inhabited and helped to shape it, makes ‘Barth’ simultaneously an object of study for theologians; an authoriser and identifying marker for theologians’ work; and the label for a unified, coherent and in principle indefinitely extendable pattern of theological reasoning. Insofar as he and his work are ‘only’ an object of study, the questions discussed in my first

²⁰ In other subdisciplinary circles, of course, his name provokes a strong negative reaction.

²¹ On the systematic character of theological claims and arguments, and the sense in which this character might be inherent in the nature of theology and hence independent of the historically-specific genre of ‘systematics’, see A.N. Williams, *The Architecture of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

section about the lived context from which his writings arise can come into play. However, insofar as he is an authoriser of theologians' work, these questions about the lived context of his writings are liable to be pulled into a different and more politically charged question about whether his theological voice remains authoritative and trustworthy; and insofar as he is the originator of a theological 'system', there is a perhaps inevitable tendency to return to *his* voice and perspective as soon as theological judgements need to be made. The exercise of 'making connections beyond what is set out on the page', when what is set out on the page is the thought of a specific author, also tends to lead into 'making connections' to the author – reading all things in relation to *Barth*.

Some of these general, and ostensibly gender-neutral, points about how the systematic-theological canon works might seem unremarkable if the canon were not dominated by men – if the focus on individuals – who happen to be men – as the originators of theological systems did not mirror so neatly the (history of ideas) focus on men as heroic inventors and innovators,²² the (ecclesial) focus on male-dominated preaching and teaching offices as the guarantee of orthodoxy,²³ or the mid-twentieth-century male academic's assumption that the household would revolve around his work. In fact, however, with the canon as it is, we end up with a situation in which understanding theology better involves telling men's stories from a male-centred point of view; and these stories, in turn, reinforce the gendered structure of theological authority. This becomes particularly clear when the subject matter of the stories relates to the politics of sex and gender.

Questioning 'The Question': On the Sex Lives of Theologians

In 'When Karl Met Lollo' says of the question of whether Karl Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum had sexual intercourse that it is '*the* question that Barth's domestic situation has inevitably placed in the minds of his readers'.²⁴ There has indeed been much agonising over this question in certain sections of the blogosphere – although not everything that is an interesting question on the internet is an interesting question in real life. In the blogosphere, 'the question' has generally been posed in specific terms: did Karl Barth do something naughty? In online discussions following Christiane Tietz's paper, Charlotte von Kirschbaum became the forbidden woman with whom Karl Barth might or might not have had sex; the question was about what sex with von Kirschbaum would in theory have meant for *him*, for *his* theology, for *his* trustworthiness or otherwise as an author.²⁵

Looking at the story, even briefly, from another perspective might place a different question in the mind of the reader: did Charlotte von Kirschbaum have any choice about whether to have sex with Karl Barth? As Plant explains, her reputation and social situation was already that of a mistress. Her family had rejected her; despite this, she was comfortably off, for just as long as she remained in the Barth household and was in a position to live on Karl Barth's money. She was, in other words, entirely dependent for her basic livelihood on a man who found her work useful, and who was also sexually attracted to her. She was in a position of extreme structural vulnerability. If Karl Barth had decided unilaterally that this should be a sexual relationship, it is hard to see what choice Charlotte von Kirschbaum would have had in the matter. Needless to say, this aspect of the story – the severe limits placed on a woman's sexual choices by her lack of economic and social power, combined with

²² On the cultural history of which see Christine McLeod, *Heroes of Invention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). I am grateful to Graeme Gooday for discussions of this point.

²³ For a theological critique of which see Tom Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology* volume 1 (Baker Academic Press 2019), chapter 4.

²⁴ 'When Karl met Lollo', p. 141.

²⁵ Plant, unlike other authors as far as I can see, does allude to some of the possible consequences for von Kirschbaum when he refers to the 'raw fact' that von Kirschbaum was never pregnant. Obviously nobody could know that to be a fact except – possibly – von Kirschbaum herself.

the sexual double standard – exemplifies a structural injustice that repeats, *mutatis mutandis*, across multiple historical contexts, with #MeToo and ‘sex for rent’ as only its most recent manifestations.²⁶ Arguably, this structural injustice deserves at least as much attention as the possibility that a famous male theologian had sex with someone other than his wife – not least because there is rather more firm ground on which to build constructive theological responses.²⁷

Before anyone panics, the point here is *not* to level any accusations against Karl Barth – there would be no evidential foundation for them. I am trying to draw attention to the crucial fact that there is a politics of sex and gender at play, both in the story of the Barth-von Kirschbaum household and in how that story is told. The personal may be theological – but it is certainly political. Jumping straight from the personal to the theological, while missing out the politics – moving from ‘the question’ of Karl Barth’s sex life *either* to ‘Barth’s’ theology of marriage and sexuality *or* to broader questions about the trustworthiness of ‘Barth’ the theologian – not only leads rather directly to the troubling questions about voyeurism and moralism with which Tietz, Plant and other wrestle, but also tends to reproduce uncritically the gendered public/private split discussed above. If we ignore the societal, political and economic context that framed the relationships, all we have to talk about is what went on in the bedroom.

It suited Karl Barth, and his generation of theologians, very well for sex – and for that matter, reproduction and child-rearing – to be a domestic matter, carefully segregated from both the professional and the political world, its own discrete ‘context’ with its own discrete section of the *Church Dogmatics*. It kept a large number of questions that affected women’s lives and life chances (such as the sexual double standard, the economics of marriage, and the barriers to women’s entry into public life) firmly off the agenda, and maintained the position of the male theological subject for whom sex was a - pleasant, foolish, disturbing, transgressive – distraction from the weighty questions of life. Telling the Karl Barth-Nelly Barth-Charlotte von Kirschbaum story as a domestic drama centred on a dysfunctional love triangle – a soap opera with three main characters – makes it, in turn, a piece of humanising background or interesting emotional texture, without ongoing implications or lessons for a contemporary audience beyond its possible effects on ‘the Professor’ and hence on ‘his’ work. A particular way of managing gender and sex, focused on male sexuality and the heteropatriarchal family structure, is thus safely insulated against (for example) the theological critique that Karl Barth himself levels at systems of government.

Without minimising the vast difference between the stories themselves, I note at this point that the ‘story of the story’ of John Howard Yoder’s serial sexual harassment and abuse – as it still reverberates around the theological circles within which Yoder was (or still is) an authorising voice – reveals, in a much more extreme way, the problems that arise for theology when sex and gender are treated as ‘private’ and reduced to questions of individual behaviour. As Karen Guth has shown, a group of early responses to the disclosures of Yoder’s abusive behaviour focused on the question of whether (and how) Yoder could possibly be rehabilitated or preserved as a theological authority – and ignored what the story had to say about ‘the systemic violence of sexism, misogyny, sexual abuse and abuses of power, including... the ways academic and ecclesial structures and practices

²⁶ On the history and context of the former, see Ann Pellegrini, ‘#MeToo: Before and After’, *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 19/4 (2018), pp. 262-264. On the latter, see Harvey Jones, ‘Sex for rent: the rogue landlords who offer free rooms in return for “favours”’, *The Guardian* 2nd April 2018

<https://www.theguardian.com/money/2018/apr/02/sex-for-rent-accommodation-rogue-landlords-campaign>

²⁷ As developed, for example, in the work of the Shiloh Project:

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/siibs/sresearch/the-shiloh-project>. See also Johanna Stiebert, *Rape Myths, The Bible and #MeToo* (London: Routledge, 2019).

may facilitate these problems'.²⁸ A particular attitude to Yoder's sexual behaviour – as the (appalling) transgressions of an individual behind closed doors – shut off a set of questions about the power structures, academic politics and organisational practices that facilitated that abusive sexual behaviour, and shut them off, *inter alia*, from theological critique. It also, of course, ensured that the story as told and discussed was about Yoder – his motives, his work, his status as sinner and recipient of forgiveness – and not about the female survivors; privatisation and individualisation of the issue goes along with the preservation of male privilege, in that the powerful and authoritative man is still the subject of the story.

So, should we be retelling the story of the Barth-von Kirschbaum household arrangement, and the relationships within it, not as a dysfunctional love story, but as a story about the contradictory pressures of an ecclesially- and socially-sanctioned system of patriarchal marriage, and about the relationships between professional status, economic security and sexual morality? Such a reading would presumably have theological implications – including implications for the interpretation of the *Church Dogmatics*, for those who are mostly focused on such things. To reiterate a point already made, it might draw critical attention to the way in which the discussion of sexuality in the *Church Dogmatics* is insulated from questions of community or of political life – and contribute to conversations about the relationships between different sections of the work. It might produce a reading that uses *Church Dogmatics* – somewhat 'against the grain', but on lines already hinted at by Plant²⁹ – to critique the obsession with 'sexual ethics' (by which is usually meant, what one man chooses to do with his sexual organs) in certain church circles. It might even set up the possibility of a wider conversation about how 'sexual ethics' relates, to name but a few obvious examples, to economics, to work, to power and authority within and outwith the churches – and to theologies of the incarnation and to ecclesiology. What might the *Church Dogmatics*, read with and beyond itself, have said into a situation in which (male) professors' projects counted for everything? What might it have offered for the critique of a situation in which a man's sexual activity is – within certain well-understood limits – his private business, and a woman's sexual activity determines the course of her life? What about a contemporary situation in which inclusion and seriousness within a theological discipline can be judged, *inter alia* and even if only as a shortcut, by the frequency of name-checks given to one of a select list of men?

Concluding Thoughts: Can We Avoid Telling The Story?

There is a risk, however, that the sort of rereading of Barth-von Kirschbaum towards which I am gesturing might exacerbate rather than alleviate some of the problems already identified with recent discussions of these relationships. It might, for example, lead readers to lay even more accusations against Karl Barth as an individual (he was a sexist exploiter of women's labour as well as an unfaithful husband!) and to respond with even more contorted defences of Karl Barth as an individual (he made sure that Charlotte von Kirschbaum and Nelly Barth were much better off than most women of their time!) Indeed, outwith theology, the feminist insight that 'the personal is political' has frequently been inverted in practice to make politics personal – to demand from individuals a flawless personal performance of the 'correct' politics (however much we know, or

²⁸ Karen Guth, 'Doing Justice to the Complex Legacy of John Howard Yoder: Restorative Justice Resources in Witness and Feminist Ethics', *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 35/2 (2015), pp. 119-139, here p. 125.

²⁹ 'When Karl Met Lollo', p.142.

ought to know, about the impossibility of doing that) and to condemn out of hand the words and actions of those who 'fail'.³⁰

This focus on attacking and defending the great theologian – with its parallels in political movements – takes us back to the questions raised earlier about the authority of the author in theology, and the multiple and contradictory ensuing pressures on 'Barth' and his legacy. It pushes us to ask what is at stake in attacking or defending a visible individual – and whether it is perhaps the honour and security of an in-group that knows itself to be a threatened minority, and that group's collective sense of the right to assert superiority (moral, political or theological) over others. The context in which 'Barth's' name carries authority and provides security – or alternatively is ridiculed and rejected – is, after all, one in which theology itself holds a precarious institutional position in the academy, the churches and the public sphere, while maintaining the audacious claim to speak truthfully about God and all things in relation to God. Perhaps Karl Barth, like the celebrity who finds himself the unwilling centrepiece of a tabloid story, or like the revered leader of an aspiring-to-be revolutionary movement, has been set up to fail by a public that has become too reliant on the great achievements of a few great men.

It is important in this, however, not to ignore the theological reasons why 'Barth' – and other individual theologians – assume such importance. A focus on the work of individuals is, I have suggested, not only a matter of maintaining in-groups and securing intellectual pedigrees; it is also part of how we recognise and do justice to the coherent and open-ended character of theological thought, which in turn arises from the subject matter of theology. I have suggested here that the systematic character of theology can, but does not need to, lead to an account or mode of theological work in which all lines (in history or in thought) point back to the individual author of the system. My concluding suggestion is that the best response to the 'Karl, Nelly and Lollo' story is to take it as a cue to follow the lines of connection from the *Church Dogmatics*, not inwards to 'the Professor' and his 'private life', but outwards to the complex, conflicted and multiply failing ecclesial and academic communities within which theology was and is done. It should be possible to engage in critical and constructive theological conversation about how these communities are formed, the assumptions on which they rest and the different forms of labour that sustain them – using these stories about the historical contexts of theology to help us to recognise situations and concerns in which contemporary theology is implicated.

³⁰As discussed, famously, in Joreen (Jo Freeman), 'Trashing: The Dark Side of Sisterhood', *Ms.* April 1976, pp. 49-51, 92-98; available at <https://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/trashing.htm>.